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# ÉTUDES CELTIQUES

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# ON A BEAUTIFUL GIRL AND SOME GOOD BARLEY BEER

BY  
Max NELSON

An inscription in Roman capitals on a spindle whorl from Autun, France (ancient Augustodunum) reads: *nota vimpi | curmi da*.<sup>1</sup> This has been interpreted as a combination of Gallic and Latin and generally translated as « Beautiful girl, give (me) beer ».<sup>2</sup> The first part of this translation seems fairly certain,<sup>3</sup> but the latter part should probably rather be interpreted as being purely Celtic and meaning « good barley beer », the whole phrase thus being a statement of the two things an ancient Gallic man sought most. I would like first to present other ancient evidence for the fixed expression « good beer » and then I would like to show that *curmi* refers specifically to barley beer.

The fifth century A. D. Welsh St. Cynon is said to have quoted the proverb *curw da yw allwed calon*, that is, « good beer is the key to the heart ».<sup>4</sup> Here *curw da* corresponds precisely to the *curmi da* of the spindle whorl, and it has in fact been convincingly proposed that *curmi* is related to Welsh *curw* (as well as Old and Middle Irish *cúirm*).<sup>5</sup> It

1. P. WUILLEUMIER, ed., *Inscriptions latines des Trois Gaules*, 1963, 209, n° 529. A drawing of it can be found at P.-Y. LAMBERT, *La langue gauloise*, 1994, 123. On the difficulty of dating such spindle whorls, see P.-Y. LAMBERT, « Gaulois tardif et latin vulgaire », *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 49-50, 1997, 396-413, at 407.

2. For instance, E. C. POLOMÉ, « The Linguistic Situation in the Western Provinces of the Roman Empire », *ANRW* II.29.2, 1983, 509-553, at 530, n. 63. W. MEID (« Gallisch oder Lateinisch? Soziolinguistische und andere Bemerkungen zu populären gallo-lateinischen Inschriften », *ANRW* II.29.2, 1983, 1019-1044, at 1034) translates: « Schönes Mädchen, gib Bier ». J. P. ESKA (« Miscellanea Gallica », *The Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 39, 1992, 16-23, at 18) translates it as « pretty girl, give beer! » and suggests that *curmi* « has been fronted ahead of the imperative verb in the VP to stress the beverage desired ». Lambert (1994 [see n. 1 above], 123) translates: « Fille belle, donne(-moi) de la cervoise ».

3. For *nota vimpi* meaning « beautiful girl » here, see especially M. LEJEUNE, « Notes d'étymologie gauloise: II. gaulois *vimpi* et *i(m)mi* », *Études celtiques* 15, 1976-1978, 96-104, at 96-101, who cites similar spindle whorls and previous scholarship on the question, and shows that *vimpi* was probably a feminine nominative and vocative (I here assume that it is a nominative). See also P. H. BILLY, *Thesaurus Linguae Gallicae*, 1993, 158, s. v. *vimpi*.

4. This is cited in *Acta sanctorum* 66.145A.

5. See, for instance (aside from works cited above), A. HOLDER, *Alt-celtischer Sprachschatz*, 1896, vol. 1, 1202, s. v. *curmi*; G. DOTTIN, *La langue gauloise: grammaire, textes et glossaire*, 1920, 248, s. v. *κόρυμα* and 249, s. v. *κούρμι*; and J. WHATMOUGH, *The Dialects of Ancient Gaul*, 1970, 455. For the possible origins of the word *curmi*, see also H. WAGNER, « Studies in the Origins of Early Celtic Traditions », *Ériu* 26, 1975, 1-26, at 12; and R. KÖDDERITZSCH, « Keltisch und Thrakisch », in M. ROCKEL und S. ZIMMER, eds., *Akten des ersten Symposiums deutschsprachiger Keltologen (Gosen bei Berlin, 8.-10. April 1992)*, 1993, 139-157, at 147-149.

may also not be far-fetched to propose the existence of a Gallic *da* (an abridgment of *daſon*) meaning « good » corresponding to the Welsh. Furthermore, a decorated cup from Mainz, Germany (ancient Mogontiacum) from the early fourth century A.D. reads: *imple (h)ospita ol(l)a(m) de cervesa da*.<sup>6</sup> Rather than considering the *da* to be a superfluous, and oddly delayed, imperative, the phrase should probably be translated as: « Waitress, fill up the jug with good wheat beer ».<sup>7</sup> Also at the first synod of Aachen of August A.D. 816 it was decided that where there was no wine a double measure of *cervisa bona* could be given to monks.<sup>8</sup>

As can be seen, I have translated *curmi* as « barley beer » and *cervesa* as « wheat beer ». Dioscorides explicitly says that *κοῦρμι* is made from barley (ἐκ τῆς κριθῆς).<sup>9</sup> Posidonius had said that the rich Gauls drink wine, and that the next richest have « wheaten beer prepared with honey, and among the many there is plain [beer]. It is called *korma* » (ζῦθος κύρινον μετὰ μέλιτος ἐσκευασμένον, παρὰ δὲ τοῖς πολλοῖς καθ' αὐτό· καλεῖται δὲ κόρμα).<sup>10</sup> Clearly Posidonius uses ζῦθος<sup>11</sup> to refer generically to beer but it is unclear whether κόρμα applies to both the honey wheat beer and the plain beer or simply the latter. I would suggest that it applies simply to the latter, which is not only plain in not having honey in it, but also in being made from barley rather than wheat. And in fact, in another passage Posidonius speaks of Gallic barley beer.<sup>12</sup> Where the cereal to be used for *cervesa* (and

6. S. KUNZL, « Ein Biergefäß aus Mainz: barbotinedekorierte Terra Sigillata mit Inschriften », *Mainzer Zeitschrift* 86, 1991, 171-185, at 171. The restorations are my own. Note that Alcuin (*Epistola* 5 in C. Chase, ed., *Two Alcuin Letter-Books*, 1975, 27-28) spoke of an *olla* filled with *celia acerba* (« sour beer »).

7. A. V. SIEBERT (« ...es fehlt nirgendwo in der Welt an dergleichen », in F. Both, ed., *Gerstensaft und Hirsebir - 5000 Jahre Biergenuss*, 1998, 111-133, at 123) translates rather: « Nimm und füll, Wirtin, den Becher mit Bier ! ». This inscription is very similar to one found on a ring-shaped flask from Paris, France (ancient Lutetia), which reads on one side (*CIL* XIII.10018.7a): *(h)ospita reple lagona(m) cervesa*, that is, « Waitress, fill up the flask with wheat beer ». The other side of this vessel likely reads: *copo conditu(m) [= conditu(m)] (h)abes est reple(n)da* (« Bartender, do you have spiced wine? It [i.e. the vessel] needs to be filled »). Some, however, read *reple, da* and translate: « 'Bartender, do you have spiced wine?' 'There is some'. 'Fill, give' »; see, for instance, P.-M. DUVAL, *La vie quotidienne en Gaule pendant la paix romaine*, 1952, 123.

8. *Legislatio Aquisgranensis* 20 (in K. Haltinger, ed., *Corpus Consuetudinum Monasticum*, 1963, vol. 1, 462-463) = 22 (547-548).

9. DIOSCORIDES, *Materia medica* 2.88 Wellman.

10. POSIDONIUS, *Historia*, fr. 170 Theiler (in Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 4.142c); for κόρμα, see also HENYCHUS, *Lexicon* 13591 Latte s. v. A glossary from the ninth century A.D. (*CGL* II.119.26) gives the form *curmen*.

11. The manuscripts (and standard editions) read ζῦθος but a long υ for the word is metrically guaranteed in Dio Chrysostomus, *Oratio* 32.82 (and for the Latinized form, see COLUMELLA, *Rei rusticae scriptores* 10.116). For the various uses of ζῦθος, see M. NELSON, « ζυτουργετον: A Scholarly Ghost Word », *Mnemosyne* 54, 2001, 721-723, at 723, n. 6.

12. POSIDONIUS, *Historia* 23, fr. 169 Theiler (in Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica*, 5.26.2) (where, incidentally, all editors have ζῦθος). Gallic barley beer is also mentioned by Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*Antiquitates romanae* 13.11.1).

variants) is specifically mentioned it is always wheat,<sup>13</sup> until the word comes to designate beer generically by at least the seventh century A.D.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, *curmi* and *cervesa* are nowhere equated, and the Gallic medical writer Marcellus of Bordeaux from the fifth century A.D. mentions adding salt in hot *cervesa* or *curmi* to cure a cough, probably meaning « in wheat or barley beer ».<sup>15</sup> Similarly, in other texts *cervesia* and *camum* are paired,<sup>16</sup> probably again contrasting wheat and barley beer, since, whenever it is specified, *κάμινον* or *camum* is said to be made from barley.<sup>17</sup>

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13. In a glossary from the ninth century A.D. (CGL III.315.69), surely relying on older sources, *cervesia* is defined as « a drink [made] from wheat » (ποματος εκ πυρων = πόμα τὸ εκ πυρῶν ?). Another glossary (CGL V.177.25), as well as Isidore (*Etymologiarum* 20.3.17), say that *cervesia* or *cervisia* is made from *frumentum*, which could mean wheat or cereals generally; Pliny (*Historia naturalis* 18.12.68) also says that Gauls make a beer from *frumentum* (here certainly wheat, since it appears in a discussion of different types of wheat).

14. The generic use of the word is first found in JONAS, *Vita Columbani* 26 (= PL 87.1026B), where *cervisia* is said to be « boiled from the juice of wheat or barley » (*ex frumenti vel hordei succo excoquitur*); see also JONAS (?), *Vita Sadalbergae* 20 (= MGH-SRM v, 61.9) : « the juice of wheat or barley, which they call *cervisa* » (*ius tritici vel ordei, quod cervisam nuncupant*).

15. MARCELLUS, *De medicamentis* 16.33 (this is assuming that the *curmi* here is indeclinable). W. Meid does not propose such a reading in his recent in-depth discussion of this phrase (*Heilpflanzen und Heilprüche: Zeugnisse gallischer Sprache bei Marcellus von Bordeaux*, 1996, 32-35).

16. ULPIANUS, *Sabinus* 23 in JUSTINIANUS, *Digesta* 33.6.9 and DIOCLETIANUS, *Edictum de pretiis* 2.11.

17. *κάμινον*: PRISCUS, *Ecloga historiae gothicae* fr. 11.2 Blockley; *camum*: the Latin translation of Dioscorides from the sixth century A.D. (2.70 in T. M. AURACHER and H. STADLER, eds., « Dioscorides Longobardus, liber ii. », *Romanische Forschungen* 10, 1899, 184-247, at 210), in which the word is in fact used to translate *κοῦρμι*, and a ninth century A.D. glossary (CGL III.315.69).